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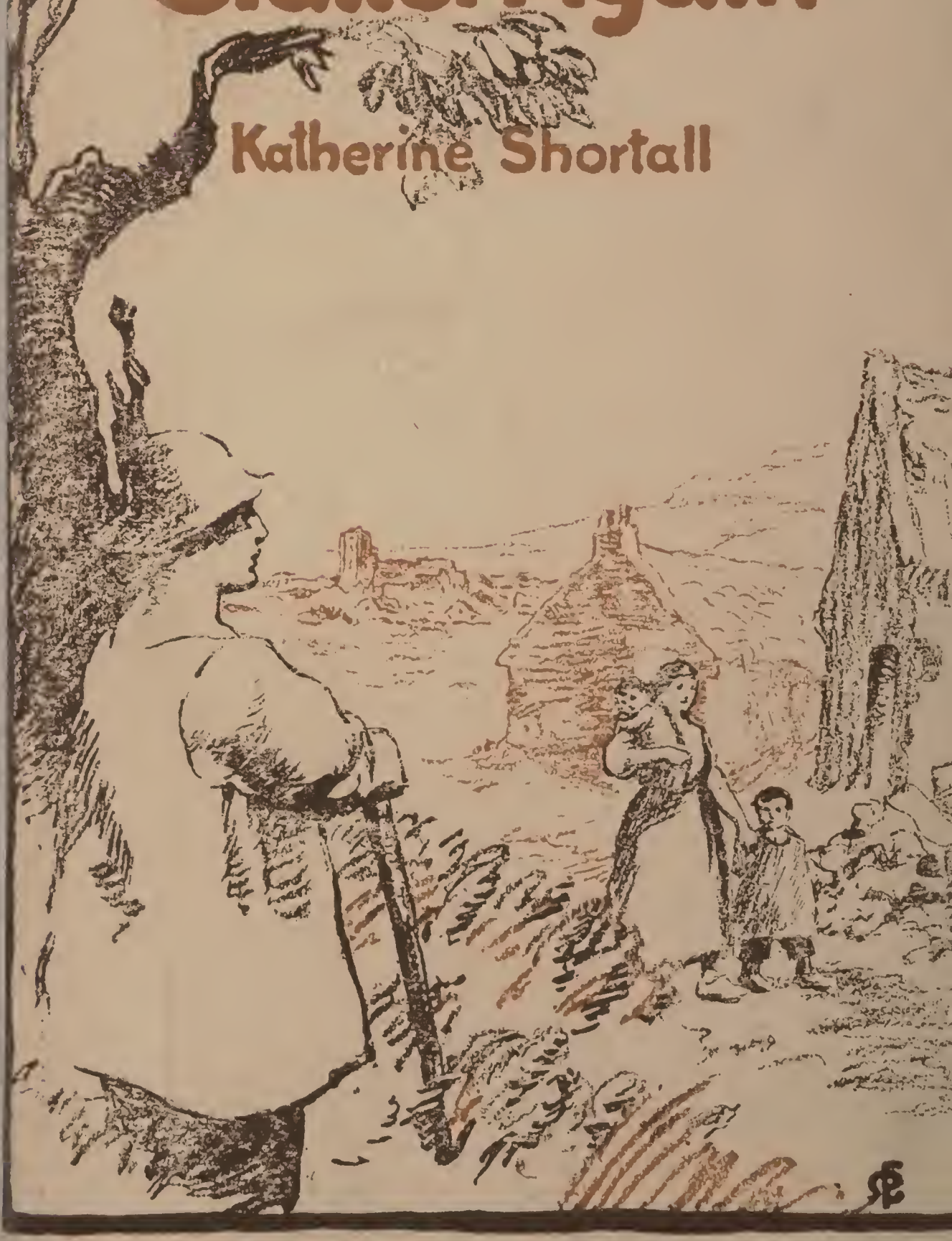
Where the Sabots Clatter Again

Katherine Shortall



The Radcliffe Unit in France collaborated with the French Red Cross in its work of reconstruction after the Armistice. It was as a member of this unit and as chauffeuse in the devastated regions that the writer received the impressions set forth in these sketches.

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Where the Sabots Clatter Again

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by

Katherine Shortall

Ralph Fletcher Seymour
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RADCLIFFE COLLEGE ENDOWMENT FUND
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DEC -1 1921

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WHERE THE SABOTS CLATTER AGAIN.

Little Grains of Sand

E. H. S. 10/1/22

WHERE THE SABOTS CLATTER AGAIN.

THE BRIDE OF NOYON.

RETURNING flush upon the plain. Streaks of color across a mangled landscape: the gentle concealment of shell hole and trench. This is what one saw, even in the summer of 1919. For the sap was running, and a new invasion was occurring. Legions of tender blades pushed over the haggard No Man's Land, while reckless poppies scattered through the ranks of green, to be followed by the shyer starry sisters in blue and white. Irrepressibly these floral throngs advanced over the shell torn spaces, crowding, mingling and bending together in a rainbow riot beneath the winds that blew them. They were the vanguard.

* * * *

In the midst of the reviving fields lay Noyon: Noyon, that gem of the Oise, whose delicate outline of spires and soft tinted roofs had graced the wide valley for centuries. Today the little city lay blanched

and shapeless between the hills, as all towns were left that stood in the path of the armies. The cathedral alone reared its battered bulk in the midst; a resisting pile, its two grim and blunted towers frowning into the sky. Nobly Gothic through all the shattering, the great church rose out of the wreckage, with flying buttresses still outspread like brooding wings to the dead houses that had sunk about her.

But Noyon was not dead. We of the Red Cross knew that. We knew that in cellars and nooks of this labryinth of ruin already hundreds of hearts were beating. On this calm September morning the newly cleared streets resounded with the healthful music of hammer and saw, and cart-wheels rattled over the cobblestones, while workmen called to each other in resonant voices. Pregnant sounds, these, the significance of which we could estimate. For we had seen Noyon in the early months of the armistice: tangled and monstrous in her attitude of falling, and silent with the bleeding silence of desertion. Then, one memorable day, the stillness had been broken by the first clatter of sabots—that wooden

noise, measured, unmistakable, approaching. Two pairs of sabots and a long road. Two broad backs bent under bulging loads; an infant's wail; a knock at the Red Cross Door—but that was nearly eight months before.

The *Poste de Secours* was closed for the first time since Madame de Vigny and her three young *infirmières* had come to Noyon. Two women stood without, one plump and bareheaded, the other aged and bent, with a calico handkerchief tied over her hair. They stared at the printed card tacked upon the entrance of the large patched-up house that served as Headquarters for the French Red Cross.

"*Tiens! c'est fermé*," exclaimed Madame Talon, shaking the rough board door with all her meagre weight, "and I have walked eight kilometers to get a *jupon*, and with rheumatism, too."

"Haven't you heard the news?" asked her companion with city-bred scorn.

"Ah? What news?" The crisp old face crinkled with anticipation.

"Why, Mademoiselle Gaston is to be married today."

"*Tiens, tiens! est-ce possible?* What happiness for that good girl!" and Madame Talon, forgetful of the loss of her *jupon*, smiled a wrinkled smile till her nose nearly touched her chin, and her eyes receding into well worn little puckers, became two snapping black points.

"Is it really so? And the bridegroom—who is he?"

There followed that vivacious exchange of questions and answers and speculations which accompanies the announcement of a marriage the world over.

Mademoiselle Gaston was the daughter of an ancient family of Noyon. But now, her ancestral home was a heap of debris, a tomb for men of many nations, which she did not like to visit. She took me there once, and we walked through the old tennis court where a little summer house remained untouched, its jaunty frailty seeming to mock at the desolation of all that is solid.

"Ah, I have had good times here," she said in the expressionless voice of one who has endured too much.

For now she was alone. Tennis tournaments for her were separated from the

present by a curtain of deaths, by the incomparable space of those four years.

Mademoiselle Gaston had played her part in it all. When the Germans were advancing upon Noyon, she had stuck to her post and remained in the hospital where she nursed her compatriots under enemy rule during the first occupation of the city. Something about her had made them treat her with respect, although I have been told that the Prussian officers were always vaguely uncomfortable in her presence. There was, perhaps, not enough humility in her clear eyes, and they worked her to the breaking point. Yet so impeccable and businesslike was her conduct that they could never convict her of any infringement of rules. Little did these pompous invaders suspect how this slender capable girl with the hazel eyes was spicing the hours behind their backs, and drawing with nimble and irreverent pencil portraits of her captors, daring caricatures which she exhibited in secret to the terrified delight of her patients. Luckily for her this harmless vengeance had not been discovered,

for doubtless she would have paid dearly for her Gallic audacity.

She was small of stature and very thin. Not even the nurse's flowing garb could conceal the angularity of her figure. One wondered how so fragile a frame could have survived the crashings and shakings of war. What secret of yielding and resisting was hers? The tension, nevertheless, had left its mark upon her young face; had drawn the skin over the aquiline profile, and compressed the sensitive mouth in a line too rigid for her years. This severity of feature she aggravated by pinning her *coiffe* low over a forehead as uncompromising as a nun's. Not a relenting suggestion of hair would she permit. Yet whatever of tenderness or hope she strove thus to hood, nothing could suppress the beauty of her luminous eyes; caressing eyes that belied her austere manner. No sight of blood nor weariness, no insult had hardened them. Even when their greenish depths went dark and wide with reminiscence, a light lurked at the bottom—the reflection of something dancing. Yes, everybody loved Mademoiselle Gaston.

For weeks we had seen it coming. She had told us of her engagement at breakfast one Monday morning after a week-end visit to her married sister in Paris. It had seemed a good business proposition. She announced it as such, calmly, with a frankness that astonished my American soul. We were pleased. She would have a château and money, and a *de* before her name. Best of all she would have peace and companionship after her lonely struggles. On the whole we were very much pleased. Madame de Vigny and her gentle niece were entirely delighted. Noyon was vociferous in its approval and congratulations. I could have wished—but at least I did not thrust any transatlantic notions into the general contentment.

And I soon saw—no one could fail to see—the change that day by day came over our reserved companion. The stern line of her lips relaxed. In amazement one day we heard her laugh. Then her laughter began to break forth on all occasions; and we listened to her singing above in her room, and we smiled at each other. That tightness of her brow dissolved in a carefree radiance.

At work, she mixed up her faultless card catalogues and laughed at her mistakes. Once, during our busy hours of distribution, we caught her blithely granting the request of fat Mère Copillet for a cook stove and thereupon absently presenting that jovial dame with a pair of sabots, much too small for her portly foot, to the amusement of all the good wives gathered in the Red Cross office. They laughed loudly in a sympathetic crowd, and Mademoiselle Gaston laughed also, and they loved her more than ever. When they learned that she had chosen to be married in the ruined cathedral of her native town, their affection turned to adoration. Not a peasant in the region but took this to be an honor to his city and to himself. Gratitude and a nameless hope filled the hearts of the people of Noyon.

The day was at hand. The *poste* was closed, for within there was a feast to prepare and a bride to adorn. In the early morning the sun-browned peasant women brought flowers, masses of goldenrod and asters. These we arranged in brass shells, empty husks of death, till the bleak spa-

ciousness of our shattered house was gay. The rooms, still elegant in proportion, lent themselves naturally to adornment; and I found myself wondering what former festivities they had sheltered, what other brides had passed down this stately corridor before the bombs let in the wind and the rain and the thieves; and what remote luxuries had been reflected in the great mirror of which only the carved gilt frame was left? Today, goldenrod and asters bloomed against the mouldy walls and one little tri-colored bouquet. Flowers of France, in truth, sprung on the battle field and offered by earth-stained fingers to her who had served.

From the kitchen came noises of snapping wood, and a sizzling which tempted me to the door. It was a fine old kitchen, though now the tiles were mostly gone from the floor, and the cracked walls were smeared with uncouth paintings, the work of some childish soul—some German mess sergeant, perhaps, who had been installed there. But today Jeanne reigned again, bending her philosophic face over the smoking stove, and evoking with infallible arts aro-

matic and genial vapors from her casseroles. At her side, Thérèse, pink and cream in the abundance of her eighteen years, fanned the fire, her eyes wide open with the novel excitement of the occasion.

"*La guerre est finie, Mademoiselle Miss!*" cried Jeanne with spoon dripping in mid air. "Today I have butter to cook with. Now you shall taste a French dinner *comme il faut!*"

In the garage, Michel, all seriousness, polished the Ford that was to carry away the bridal pair. Recently demobilized, he wore the bizarre combination of military and civilian clothes that all over France symbolized the transition from war to peace —black coat encroaching upon stained blue trousers, khaki puttees, evidence of international intimacy and—most brilliant emblem of freedom—a black and white checked cap, put on backwards. His the ultimate responsibility at our wedding ceremony and he looked to his tires and sparkplugs with passion.

The married sister, beautiful and charming in her Paris gown, was superintending the *toilette;* and when all was ready, we were

called up to examine and admire. The bride was sweet and calm, smiling dreamily at us in the foggy fragment of mirror. Below, somewhat portly and constrained in his black coat and high collar, the bridegroom marched with agitation back and forth in the corridor, clasping and unclasping his hands in their gray suède gloves. The Paris train was due. Relatives and friends began to arrive; and little nieces and nephews, all in their best clothes. Noyon had not seen anything so gay in years. There was bustle and business and running up and down stairs. The *poste*, usually clamorous with the hoarse dialect of northern France, hummed and rippled with polite conversation and courtly greetings. The bride appeared. The bridegroom's face lost its perturbed expression in his unaffected happiness at seeing her. Photographs were taken; she, gracious and bending in a cloud of tulle; he, stiffly upright but smiling resolutely. They were off in a string of carriages—sagging old carriages resurrected from the dust—while a few of us hastened to the cathedral by a

short cut to take more pictures as they entered.

The vast nave engulfed us in its desolation. The mutilated apse seemed to be far, far away, and one looked at it fearfully. High above through the broken vaulting shone the indestructible blue, and through the hollow windows the breath of Heaven wandered free. The little bride stepped bravely between the piles of refuse, daintily gathering her dress about her. A dirty sheet on the wall flapped without warning, and we had a glimpse of a gaunt and pallid crucifix, instantly shrouded again in a spasm of wind. Passing under an arch we entered a less demolished chapel. Here all Noyon was waiting.

Thin and quavering through the expectant hush came the chords of a harmonium. Rustlings and whisperings among the closely packed people as the misty white figure advanced slowly into sight. At the altar the silver-haired bishop turned his scholarly face upon her, full of tenderness; and when he spoke, his voice seemed an assurance of peace and purity. The service was long. In France one listens to a sermon

when one is married, and the pretty bridesmaids came round for three collections. The bishop talked of her father, his friend, who had died under cruel circumstances. Shoulders heaved in the congregation, and in a dark corner a sob was stifled.

"You have suffered, my children. There has been a mighty mowing and a winter of death, and our mother the earth has lain barren. But today stand up, O children, and listen and feel. We are united in these ruins by more than sorrow. What are these pulsations that beat this day upon our soul?"

The words flowed on following the ancient grooves of sermons, but the loving voice thrilled us. It floated through the dim atmosphere into our consciousness, holding us as in a dream, dovelike and soothing.

My eyes trailed to the delicate bride kneeling beside a great cracked column, and I thought of the tiny blossom again by the road, and of those stretches without the town, no longer gray, but brushed with new color. I saw the daisies and the grasses waving out on No Man's Land: like heralding banners of the triumph

march they waved, leading out of sight beyond the horizon. And as the priest talked, my heart throbbed its own silent canticle:

"Joy in the new dawned day, and in peace-awakened fields. Hope of the flower that blooms again. Faith in the unfolding of petals, gently, forever, and in season."

"*Soyez loué, Seigneur!*" the voice deepened and concluded.

Decisively, now, burst forth the reedlike chords of music. A wave of movement throughout the crowd. And the bowed form trembled a moment within its sheathing veil, against the cold stone pillar.

Little Grains of Sand

LITTLE GRAINS OF SAND

SHALL I tell you about the old woman and her statue of Sainte Claire? She was a true native of Picardy, and if I could give you her dialect, this story would be more amusing. We came upon her in the course of our visits, living in her clean little house that had been well mended. She was delighted to have someone to talk to.

"Come in, my good girl," she patronized the queenly and aristocratic Madame de Vigny. "Come in, everybody," and we all went in.

"Sit down, my dear," again to Madame de Vigny. "Those barbarians didn't leave me many chairs, but here is one, and this box will do for these young ladies." She herself remained standing, a stout old body in spite of her eighty years. Her blue eyes were clear and twinkled with fun, and she had a mischievous way of smiling out of the corner of her mouth, displaying two teeth. She loved her joke, this shrewd old lady.

"*Dites, Madame*," she said, "is it true that you give away flannel petticoats and stockings?"

"Yes, Madame, when one has need of them."

"Is it possible? And for nothing? Ah, that is good, that is generous. Tonight I shall tell Sainte Claire about you. Would you like to see my *'tiote* Sainte Claire?*" We followed her back through a little yard and down into a cellar. "You see, Mesdames, when the villains bombarded Noyon, I stayed right here. I wasn't going to leave my home for those people. One night the convent opposite was struck, and the next morning in the street I found my Sainte Claire. She wasn't harmed at all, lying on her back in the mud. 'Now God will protect me,' I said, and I picked her up in my arms and carried her into my house. And Sainte Claire said to me, 'Place me down in the cave, and you will be safe.' So I brought her down."

She led us to a tiny underground apartment, probably a vegetable cellar, and there, on a bracket jutting from the mildewed wall, stood the painted plaster image of the saint.

"*Voilà ma Sainte Claire!*" exclaimed the old peasant woman, crossing herself. "She

*Dialect for *petite.*

and I have lived down here during the bombardment and the entire occupation. She has protected me. Look, Madame—" and she showed us a corner of the ceiling that had been newly repaired. "The *obus* passed through here, and never touched us. I kept on praying to the Sainte, and she said, 'Do not move and you will be safe.' All night I was on my knees before her, and toward morning the house was hit—only one meter away the wall fell down, and we were not harmed, Madame, neither the Sainte nor I. Then Sainte Claire said to me, 'The Boches are coming. Take half of your potatoes and bring them down here.' I had a beautiful pile of potatoes, Madame, just harvested. But I took only half and put them in a sack and stuffed it with hay. For thirteen months, Madame, I slept on those potatoes. Then Sainte Claire said, 'Take half your wine, and put it down the well.' I wanted to hide it all, but she said 'No, take only half.' And I sunk one hundred bottles, Madame, of my best wine in the well. The Boches came. Five of them came to my house. Five *grands gaillards* with square heads. Oh,

they are ugly, Madame! 'Show us your wine,' they ordered. 'It is there, Messieurs, in the cellar,' I answered meek as a lamb. And they all began drinking till they were drunk. Then one of them dragged me down here by the arm, and for thirteen months, Madame, I lived in this hole with Sainte Claire while they possessed my house. They made me cook for them, the animals; but I should have starved, Madame, if I had not had my potatoes. Then the French began their bombardment. Ah, it was terrible, Madame, to be bombarded by one's friends. I did not leave this cave, and I prayed and prayed, 'Sainte Claire, save me once more!' and Sainte Claire replied, 'The French are coming. We shall not be hurt.' One morning it was suddenly quiet: the cannon had stopped. I listened and heard nothing, and I came up into my house. It was empty, Madame. The Boches had gone. One shell had fallen through the roof into my bedroom—that was all. But ah, Madame! *Noyon, pauvre Noyon!* She was like a corpse. *Ah lala, lala! Qué'malheur!* The next day our soldiers came. Ah, how

glad I was. And I asked Sainte Claire, 'May I not go to the well and bring up a bottle of wine?' And she said 'No, not yet.' Se we waited, Madame, until the day of the Armistice. Then Sainte Claire said, 'Now you may go and bring up all the wine.' And, Madame, what do you think? I went to the well and I hauled up the wine and out of the hundred bottles only two were broken." The old woman laughed with delight at the trick she had played on the invader.

"They never guessed it was there. It was Sainte Claire, Madame, who saved it. I poured her a glassful and we celebrated, Madame; we celebrated the victory down in our cave, *ma'tiote Sainte Claire* and I."

MADEMOISELLE Froissart and I left the *Poste de Secours* one day, and started for a far away village that was said to be utterly wiped out. Our drive lay over a terrific road. We crossed a vast sad plain, intersected with trenches, with nothing in sight but one monster deserted tank, still

camouflaged, and here and there the silhouette of a blasted tree against the lowering sky. These dead trees of the battle line! Sometimes, with their bony limbs flung forth in gnarled unnatural gestures, they remind me of frantic skeletons suddenly petrified in their dance of death. They are frenzied, and unutterably tragic. They seem to move; yet they are so dead. And I imagine their denuded tortured arms reaching toward unanswering Heaven in an agony of protest against the fate that has gripped all nature.

We entered a torn and tangled forest. The road was narrow and overgrown, and several times I had to dodge hand grenades that lay in the grassy ruts. The Ford ploughed bravely through deep mud, skidded, recovered, fell into holes, and kept on. My attention was so focused upon driving that I saw little else but the road ahead, though once at an exclamation from Mademoiselle Froissart, out of the corner of my eye I saw a machine gun mounted and apparently intact. The motor was toiling, but in my soul I blessed its regular noise that told me all was well. Leaving the

wood we came to what appeared to be a large rough clearing. There were no trees—only bumps of earth covered with tall weeds. To our surprise we caught sight of the jaunty blue figure of a poilu, and then a band of slouching green-coated prisoners who were digging in their heavy leisurely manner. Mademoiselle Froissart inquired for the village of Evricourt.

"*Mais c'est ici, Madame,*" replied the soldier with a grin.

"Here!" We stared. There was nothing by which one could have told that this was the site of a town, except an occasional bit of brick that showed beneath the weeds. All the Germans had stopped work to look at these two women who had so unexpectedly penetrated to this God-forsaken spot. We asked whether any of the inhabitants had returned.

"Just one old man," said the poilu, "who lives all alone in his cellar, over there." He pointed, and suddenly from the ground emerged an aged man, white haired and erect. He came toward us, an astonishingly handsome figure. His beautifully modeled head was like a bit of perfect sculpture

found suddenly among rank ruins, whose very fineness shocks us because of its contrast with its coarse surroundings. His blue eyes were piercing under bushy white brows, while a snowy and curling beard, abundant yet well trimmed, set off the dark ivory of his complexion. And on his head, above the silvery waving hair, was placed at a careful angle a blue *callot*. He was dressed in that agreeable soft blue that distinguishes the garments of those who work out of doors, and a spotless white shirt was turned back at the throat.

"*Bonjour, Mesdames,*" he greeted us, taking off his cap and came up for a chat. We were amazed at his charm and intelligence. He had come back thus alone "because, Mademoiselle, this is my home. An old man can best serve his country by living off his own land. What good is he in a strange province where they eat such ridiculous things, and where everyone has the craze for machinery? Besides, the more one's home is ruined the greater the obligation to return and rebuild it. *C'est un devoir, Mademoiselle.*" His place was here, unless—with a twinkle in my direc-

tion—Mademoiselle would take him back to America with her, in which case he would willingly leave. I laughed at the compliment and told him to name the day and the boat.

Food? He had scratched a little garden by his door and had plenty, thank you. Clothing? "Do I not look well dressed, Mademoiselle?" We admitted that he looked ready for a fête. Company? "Ah, Mademoiselle, memories, memories! I smoke my pipe and I repeople this village. It is alive for me. Look, Mademoiselle, that is where the church was—it was a pretty church. And there was the *mairie*. Only"—with a shrug of good humored despair—"now I have no more tobacco. These *messieurs*"—indicating the soldier and the Germans who were smiling good naturedly—"are kind enough to share theirs with me, but they are not very rich themselves, you see," at which they all laughed at their common plight. Here at last was something that we could offer. I usually kept cigarettes with me for such emergencies. And now I produced two boxes of them and several packages of American matches.

"Mademoiselle, I accept them with my profound thanks," said the old *gallant* with a bow, removing his cap.

At length we had to leave. A prisoner stepped forward to crank my car, and all of them, the dauntless Frenchman in the center, lined up and gave us the military salute. Before reentering the woods I looked back and saw the blue-coated figure offering a light to the green coat. From cigarette tip to cigarette tip the fraternal spark was being transmitted: the spark that crosses borders and nationalities, that glows in the darkness, and puts mankind at peace. And so we left them all—smoking; smoking out there in the ruins, smoking and dreaming of home. Of home and love unattainable beyond the Rhine; of home and love buried forever in the wreckage of war and of time.

THIS week Mademoiselle Froissart and I spent forty-eight hours in Paris, during which time we purchased one thousand toys for our Christmas party. Such a

time as I had coralling a taxi to carry our large crate of playthings to the station. Paris was gay and crowded, making up for its four years of gravity, and the conscienceless taxi drivers were having pretty much their own way, refusing all that were going in a direction that did not suit their convenience, and extorting enormous *pour boire*. I stood on the edge of the mad stream of vehicles that pressed by on the boulevard, and watched for an empty taxi. One came, the old reprobate who drove it casting his practiced eye about for a likely looking customer. He deigned to notice me, recognizing me for an American, and well knowing our national childish impatience, and its lucrative consequences. He drove up to the curb.

"Where to?" he asked defiantly, blinking his bleary eyes, his red alcoholic face set in insolent lines.

"*La Gare du Nord.*"

He reflected an instant. "Bon," he decided. I got in, resolving to take possession before breaking all the news to him.

"First I must stop at the *Grand Bazaar*

to call for a box," I said in a most matter-of-fact way.

"Ah ça! non! It can't be done!" he exclaimed in a fury. "How do you expect me to earn my living if I have to go out of my way and wait a century outside a store?"

"I will pay you for your time."

Still he refused to move. "Déscendez, déscendez!" he cried in an ugly voice. I knew the next one would be just as bad, and besides I had no time to lose. The hour of the train was approaching. Basely I resorted to bribery: "Look here, Monsieur, I am American and I will pay you well. Did you ever know an American to fail to make it worth your while?" He considered, and looked me over apprais-ingly.

"It will be twenty francs then, Madame." This was too outrageous.

"Ah non," I said in my turn, but I laughed. "*Ecoutez*, do you know what is in that box I am going to get? Toys for the little children of the devastated regions. If I don't take it with me they will have nothing, nothing at all for Christmas."

"Eh, what?" His old heart was moved. "*Pays dévasté? C'est vrai? Bien, Madame,* I will take you anywhere you wish." And he started the car. On our way through traffic he related to me over his shoulder how his wife and children had fled from Soissons while he was driving a *camion* at the front, and that their home was gone.

At the *Grand Bazaar* Mademoiselle Froissart was waiting with the huge crate of toys. It was hoisted onto the front seat beside the chauffeur, who, far from grumbling at its size, was most solicitous in placing it so that it would not jar. "We mustn't break the dolls," he said with a wink. Arriving at the station he insisted upon carrying it to the baggage room for us. "*Hey, mon vieux!*" he addressed the baggage man, "step lively and get that case on the train for Noyon. It's full of dolls—dolls for the little girls." And the whole force laughed and flew to the crate, and tenderly hustled it out to the train with paternal interest.

"Merry Christmas and many thanks," I said to our driver, holding out the twenty

francs. He did not glance at the money and pushed back my hand.

"*Non, non, Mademoiselle, c'est un plaisir,*" he murmured. I protested, but his whole expression pleaded. "It's not much, Mademoiselle. It's for the little girls—out there."

Passing through the gate, I looked back and saw him still standing and watching us. He waved his hat.

"*Bon voyage!*" he called above the crowd. Then, turning, he went back into the roaring street, doubtless to continue his business of preying upon the intimidated and helpless public.

VAUCHELLES

VAUCHELLES.

THREE roads wander down from the hills and come together; and at the point of meeting stands a crucifix. This large and dignified *Calvaire*, though bearing the nicks of bullets and faded by weather, still sheds a sorrowful beauty that is perhaps the more impressive because of these marks of desecration. It forms the center of the tiny village, whose houses cluster close to the mourning image and then straggle thinly along the three roads. Not even the war which swept over in all its ferocity has robbed Vauchelles of its winding charm. Many houses have collapsed, but the village still retains its ancient outline of peaked roofs, and on all sides orderly piles of bricks, fresh plaster and new tar paper give an aspect of thrift and optimism. Vauchelles has met the challenge of devastation and is setting things aright.

Is the town asleep? The healing July sun softly warms the silent houses and their broken walls and closed doors. No one is in sight. Yet we have come with

our camionette well laden with clothing for the inhabitants. Ah! they are all away working in the fields. Old Mademoiselle Masson, peering through the one pane of glass that is left in her window, sees us, and hobbles to the door to give us the information. She beams upon us, an unkempt yet gracious figure, and when she talks her false teeth move slightly up and down. She will run and call her sister who is up on the hill, and she will tell Madame Riflet as she goes. The news will spread. The news always spreads. Already the people are gathering, for *la Croix Rouge* is its own introduction; and these peasants, too proud—most of them—to go and ask, will accept what is freely and gladly given at their doors.

The first person I call upon is Madame Cat. Shall I soon forget that determined little face with its deep set blue eyes, and sharp features unsoftened by the brown hair that is pulled back from her forehead? Or the one room left in that tiny house, shattered and bare, yet stamped indelibly with the character of its valiant occupants? The ashes are swept in the fireplace. Two

burnished shells tattooed in a careful pattern and filled with flowers brighten the mantel. And the bed! Even though made of fragments found in the debris, with naught but a hay *paillasse* and a few old quilts dragged through the long flight and return, it is nevertheless smooth and noble, adorned only with the reverence and importance with which the French surround The Bed. The daughter comes in, a thin music-voiced girl with a fine profile like her mother's. They accept simply, and with appreciation, the useful things the Red Cross offers. In this case I am authorized to make an unusual present. For we have a few rolls of wall paper which we have been holding for someone who takes a special pride in her interior. It would cover the cracked and damp walls of Madame Cat and would add much cheer to her little room, besides keeping out the wind. Their faces are radiant at the suggestion. The daughter will come to the *poste* tomorrow for it. Can they hang it themselves? "*Ah, c'est facile, Mademoiselle!*" and the mother gives me her recipé for a wonderful glue that will hold

for years. They accompany me to the street.

"You will come again soon, Mademoiselle, and see it for yourself?"

I promise eagerly.

Across the street lives Monsieur Martin. He comes from his house to greet me and holds open the gate, a tall farmer in corduroys with gentle, genial face. His wife had died during the cruel flight from the invader, and he and his three sons have come back to the remains of their old home. He apologizes for it, though I find it immaculate. Shining casseroles hang by the hearth, the three beds are carefully made, and on the fire something savory is cooking in a *cocotte*.

"It needs a woman's touch," he says smiling. "We are four men and we do what we can, but—" he finishes with a gesture of the helpless male entangled in that most clinging, exasperating web of all—cooking and dish-washing! "*Ca n'en finit plus, Mademoiselle*," he exclaims in humorous misery. "One has no sooner finished, when one must begin again. Bah! It is woman's work," with a lordly touch

of imperiousness. It is the ancient voice of Man.

The next house is dark. No one answers my knock, and I lift the latch and go in. The windows, being broken, are all boarded up to keep out the dreaded drafts. It is a moment before I can see, though a quavering voice that is neither man's nor woman's bids me enter. Gradually my eyes make out two wise old faces of ivory in the obscurity by the hearth. They are old, old—nobody knows how old they are.

"*Entrez, Madame*," and the old woman rises with difficulty, leaning on her cane, and draws forward a chair.

"*Bonjour, Madame*," in far-away tones from the aged husband, too feeble to move alone. I linger for some time with these two dear souls—for they are scarcely more than souls. We talk of bygone, happy days, of the war, and of their present needs—so few! Then I tell them I am American.

"American?" says the old man, peering into my face, "that means—friend."

"Yes," I reply, "that means—friend."

Then I come to a wooden *barraque*, a hive buzzing with children. They are clambering at the windows and playing in the dirt before the door, all clad in a many-colored collection of scraps which an ingenious mother has pieced together. A little boy, wearing the blue *callot* of a poilu on the back of his head, sits on the doorsill. He smiles and stands up, and tells me his mother is inside. Within I find the mother seated in a room of good-natured disorder, nursing her latest born. Her lavish smile of welcome lights her broad sunburned face framed in tawny braids, and she indicates a bench for me with the ease and authority of a long practiced hostess. She sits there with the infant at her ample breast, and on her face is written unquestioning satisfaction with her part in life. A swift laughing tale I hear, of little frocks outgrown and of sabots worn through, and no place to buy anything, and little Jean so thin and nervous, "but no wonder, Mademoiselle, for he was born during the evacuation, and only Cécile to take care of me, and she just sixteen years old, and I had to be carried in a

wheelbarrow." I picture the flight, the father away at the front, the mother unable to walk, yet marshalling her little ones, comforting, cajoling, scolding, and feeding them through it all. The baby finishes with a little contented sigh and the proud mother exhibits him. "It's a boy, Mademoiselle," as exuberantly as though it were her first instead of her ninth. "*C'est un petit garçon de l'Armistice*," with a happy blush.

"Ah, let us hope that he will always be a little child of peace." But in another moment she is playing with him, chucking him under the chin. "*Tiens, mon coco! Viens, mon petit soldat*—you must grow up strong and big, for you are another little soldier for France."

Little Vauchelles, far away in the hills of the fertile Oise, I think of you. I hope I may again visit you. And I wonder. What ripples from the seething capitals will stir the placid thoughts of your stout-hearted peasants? And will your broad-browed women wait with age-old resignation for the next wave of war, or will they catch the echo that is rebounding

through all the valleys of the world and join their voices in the swelling chord for brotherhood?

In your midst, where the three roads meet, still stands the image of Christ on the Cross.

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